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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses one person's experience with the library and research services of the Australian Federal Parliament. The first section describes the multiple functions and roles of politicians, as well as their various information needs, e.g., the need for information on bills, for overseas travel, for writing speeches, and to develop special interests. The second section addresses committee dependence on parliamentary information and research services. Examples are presented of two inquiries of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee that benefited from access to the expertise of parliamentary information specialists and analysts: an examination of the state of Australia's public hospital system, and an inquiry into child migration. The third section considers the significance of access to DPL (Department of the Parliamentary Library) expertise on conscience votes, i.e., free votes when party policy does not apply. The conclusion offers two suggestions: to establish a Parliamentary Library Committee with parliamentarians on the committee, and to publicize the work that the Parliamentary Library and Research services do. (MES)

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One of a Kind: Parliamentary Information and Research Services for Parliamentarians - An Australian Senator Tells

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Introduction

I've called this paper "One of a kind" because in my experience in the Australian Federal Parliament, we have a unique library and research service. I've never met anything to match it in the many libraries I've visited and or used in my lifetime.

Before I give you some of my personal experience to address our terms of reference I want to first note that not all parliaments are privileged to have access to a parliamentary research service or, even in some cases, to a well resourced Parliamentary Library. If we argue as I do that Parliamentary Libraries and Research Services are a vital ingredient in holding the Executive of Government accountable to the people, through Politicians and Committees, i.e are a vital part of Democratic Government, of Democracy itself, then this conference may need to consider ways in which it can assist the establishment of such services in all our Parliaments.

Australia's democracy, I am very pleased to report, is of the robust - or even rowdy -kind. And for a combination of reasons, including strong support from both major political parties, there has been encouragement to allow our Parliamentary Library and its Research Service to develop the kinds of services which assist parliamentarians do their job even as the demands on them become so much greater.

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Multi functional Politicians

I arrived in Parliament in 1983 and I have therefore had some few years in which to test the systems. For 13 years I was a member of the Government, for the last 5 years in Opposition. My use of the Parliamentary Library changed considerably from government to opposition.

Over these 20 years, the world has seen the introduction of the computer and ready access to a complete overdose of information. In the face of that avalanche of data, the Parliamentary Library and its Research Service have become more important than ever.

Whereas once, politicians might have sought a paper outlining basic facts about an issue, they now seek a filtering and analysis of that data.

Over this same period, politicians arriving in our Parliament are much better educated than our earlier colleagues and therefore much better able to cover the basic facts of an issue. But the analytical critique of the surplus-to-need data remains as important as ever, if not more so.

Parliamentary research staff who live and work in Parliament House have learned to be aware of the necessary variety of our politicians and their roles. The staff see us primarily as legislators, to some degree as representatives and as policy makers or potential policy makers. However, especially if we are members of the House of Representatives in an unsafe seat, we are also at the beck and call of demanding constituents. The way in which we are likely to use the information and research services of the Department of the Parliamentary Library (DPL) is likely to be different, from one MP and Senator to the next.

To cope with these differences, the Parliamentary Library staff have started in recent years, personal visits to each politician, to better know them and their needs. At the same the politicians get to know their information and research specialist staff.

To help us perform our legislative role, staff in the Law and Bills Digest Group (in consultation with subject experts elsewhere in the research service), prepare Bills Digests, which virtually all Senators and Members in the Australian Parliament rely on to understand legislation, including its background and political context.

Bills Digests complete the circle of information available to Senators and Members on legislation, which includes the bill itself, the relevant Government Department's Explanatory Memorandum and the relevant Minister's 2nd reading speech. The purpose of the Digest is to summarise the bill's proposals and point to what the bill will do and what it will not do. The Digest may also provide some policy context and it may suggest possible consequences of the bill being passed into legislation.

I understand that a recent visitor participating in our inaugural Inter Parliamentary Study Program was aghast at the forthright position taken in the Australian Bills Digests. Senators and Members, however, take for granted that forthright position.

Such is the strong all party support for the services of the Australian Parliamentary Information and Research Service, and so strong its commitment **not** to promote the policies of either the

government or the opposition, or indeed of anyone else, that the occasional mild discomfort its independent advice may cause the government of the day, is tolerated. After all, today's government may well be tomorrow's opposition!

In our role as Parliamentary representatives, research analysts brief us for overseas travel and for meeting overseas or domestic representatives. They may also perhaps assist us write that head-turning, or eye opening address for the local High School's Speech Day, assist us clarify policy, or rights or entitlements in the case of inquiries from constituents. In the case of those on the front bench, where I was privileged to be, as Minister for Family Services from 1993 to 1996 and for some of that time as Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, independent advice is sought firm the Research Service from that being offered by the Minister's Department. Or, if we are on the Shadow Front Bench, i.e. aspiring to be ministers, we seek out the library and research staff to assist us develop policy options, consider policy alternatives and explore international parallels for appropriate models, and to critique Government policy.

They also assist us with the routine tasks of being a politician e.g., at the time of writing, Sir Don Bradman, great Australian Cricketer had just died and the library provided C.V. and background information to help us to speak in condolence motions.

They also assist us develop our special interests, one of which in my case has been the issue of the position of women in parliament. It gives me great pride to note at this, the Centenary of Australia's Federation, that Australia, and my own home state of South Australia in particular, have led the world on the issue of full franchise for women. In 1894 women in SA got the right to vote and stand for Parliament. In 1902 that right to vote and stand for Parliament was extended to all Australian women, but Aboriginal men and women were excluded. It took more than 60 years for Aboriginal people to gain that right.

We have not made sufficient inroads into women's representation, notwithstanding that my party, the ALP, with success in the recent by-election in the seat of Ryan in March this year, has met its affirmative action target for women in the Federal Parliament one year ahead of schedule.[1]

However, we have put different issues on the political agenda that would not have been there without us. Perhaps the best example of this, that I was involved with, is that when a Labor Government came to office in 1983, there was a Women's Policy Agenda, *'Towards Equality'* which included 42 policy initiatives. Among the most significant of these was the great Sex Discrimination legislation, along with the *Women's Budget Statement*, which required all government departments to report on the gender breakdown of expenditure in portfolios – how much was spent specifically on women and women's issues.

In all of this, our job is to be the politician and not the academic. However we must not look academically foolish and thus we want and need to be able to rely on high quality, independent and impartial advice, delivered in a useable fashion.

I mentioned earlier the flood of information confronting politicians. There is another challenge and that is the demand for legislation in areas where previously the law was silent – e.g. environment protection, human organ transplants, genetic modification, ethics of cloning. These are just a few of the issues that put great pressure on politicians who have to understand these

whole new areas, often in short time, so they can make informed decisions when they vote on the legislation. The Parliamentary Library and Research Services are critical in assisting the politicians by providing them with background briefings and information.

From my position on the Joint Library Committee of the Parliament, I have learnt that there are many and varied ways in which staff of the DPL access information, including reliance on getting accurate factual and publicly available information from Departments of Government.

Last year saw an extraordinary challenge to this particular source which caused widespread and cross party concern. The outrage of politicians from across all parties at the threat to the independence of the library and its advice meant a satisfactory resolution was rapidly sought and found. This issue, which I understand will be dealt with more fully by Dr Verrier in her introduction to the Workshop on *Managing the Political Environment* later this week, above all illustrated the strength of commitment on all sides of politics to the availability to all parliamentarians of an independent, objective, confidential, timely and high quality source of advice in order to effectively carry out their many and varied responsibilities.

Committee Dependence on Parliamentary Information and Research Services

There is a good deal in the literature about the contribution which committees make to assist Parliaments hold the Executive to account.[2] This is because committee hearings and reports, and the government's response to those reports is, in the main in the public domain. It is interesting to note that the contribution of Parliamentary Information and Research Services for individual politicians is necessarily confidential for the vast majority of work that they do, and therefore does not get the same publicity.[3]

This is not usually the case for work done for committees. While Australian Parliamentary Committees are generously resourced by many standards, there is a need for ongoing assessment for how best to service these extensive committees. By definition, staff of committees, who, of necessity work on a great range of inquiries, cannot be experts on every subject. This is where the staff of the DPL comes in. And I know that this is why Dr Verrier commends the Canadian Parliamentary model which has formalised committee support from the Research Service and has sought to develop informally something comparable in Australia.

I would like to refer to two inquiries of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee which I chair, both of which could not have achieved the same result without access to the expertise of both parliamentary information specialists and analysts:

Healing Our Hospitals

The objective of this inquiry was to examine the state of Australia's Public Hospital System, the stress on the system and the circumstances which have given rise to unacceptable waiting lists in Australia's hospitals. In summary its Terms of Reference were to examine how hospital services may be improved, including the adequacy of current funding and options for reform.

The Committee made 42 recommendations, addressing each of the inquiry's nine terms of reference. Recommendations were made in four key areas:

- an urgent immediate increase in funding from the Commonwealth to be matched by the States and Territories;
- an end to the fragmented funding of health programs and the commencement of a new era of inter-governmental cooperation;
- a move to open reporting of funding and performance against national standards and;
- a focus on improving the quality of care through the use of new information technologies.

In this case, because of the expertise which the DPL had, and the Committee did not, an expert from the Parliamentary Research Service, Paul Mackey, was seconded to the Committee for a total of more than three months, to assist the inquiry and the writing of the reports. He brought to the Inquiry specialist skills, particularly in the areas of health policy and financing and Federal-State health relations not otherwise available to the Committee. The placement was also a model of best practice in cooperation in the Parliament between its different elements (there are five separate Parliamentary Departments), in this case between a Senate Committee and the Information and Research Service staff, so that all the resources of the Parliament were focussed on best outcomes for the Parliament.

While the government has yet to respond to this report[4], the Committee confidently expects that its deliberations will be taken into account in the development of policy in this extraordinarily complex context of contemporary government.

Inquiry into Child Migration

For its inquiry into Child Migration, the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee needed to understand the circumstances in which it was possible 'to dispose of children by deportation' i.e. to send British 'orphans' to Australia. What was the relevant legislation and what was the social context which created it? What have been the changing attitudes to children which eventually brought this practice into disrepute and how did legislation change to reflect it? The revelations were startling.

DPL has assisted in revealing the background and vital history and in the analysis of the huge amount of material resulting. What it can't do, however, is tell the 'on-the-spot' story. The Committee has held public and in camera hearings around Australia and made an unprecedented visit to the UK and Canada in April to discuss the issues with the agencies, governments and families of those affected. At the time of writing, the Committee is finalising its report with a view to tabling it in the very near future.

The Significance of access to DPL expertise on conscience votes

In the case of conscience votes, or free votes, when Party Policy does not apply, or even in the case of private members' bills, there is a greater dependence than usual on the assistance of the Information and Research Service. Examples include the difficult but important issues of the termination of pregnancy, family law, euthanasia and even, in 1964, on the fluoridation of Canberra's water. In these cases where each politician has to make up his and her own mind, the skills of the Parliamentary Library Staff are stretched to the limit to provide comprehensive briefing material across all sides of the issues.

Conclusions

Two questions were suggested by the Chair for papers in this session to address, namely:

1) whether parliamentary research services are evolving to meet the ever more complex requirements of their clients, and

2) whether there is anything unique in the kinds of services delivered by parliamentary research services,

The answer, in the case of the Australian experience, is a resounding 'yes' to both questions and I hope that the foregoing has contributed to making this case. As issues have become more complex and timescales even tighter, there is no doubt that the professional expertise of the staff of the Parliamentary Information and Research Service in the Australian Parliament has stretched and grown - and certainly has risen to the challenge! The sophistication, as well as the breadth, of the work now done for Senators and Members is quite extraordinary.

Similarly, what parliamentary staff do, that academics, interest groups and others do not do, is present the material or the briefing in the way that takes account the personal preferences of each and every Senator and Member. We call it having extraordinary 'parliamentary nous', or 'thinking as we do' or 'understanding the heartbeat of the parliament'. And this, I propose, is unique to those of us who live on 'the hill'.

On the last part of the question, namely whether this strength is well enough recognised to ensure the survival of parliamentary information and research services in a competitive world is perhaps a more difficult question in an environment of declining resources and a trend to outsourcing.

Being valued therefore, which our Information and Research Service is by all Senators and Members, is critical. Perhaps attention should be given by those of you responsible for the management of these critical resources, to achieving greater public recognition of the very important role you all play.

Two suggestions:

Firstly, if it does not exist, establish a Parliamentary Library Committee with parliamentarians on the committee, it is very useful in our Parliament. The politicians get to understand the range and amount of work done, the cost of it, the importance of defending it and of securing an appropriate budget for it.

Secondly another way to get publicity and support for our Parliamentary Library and Research services is to 'out' the work that they do. For example I sought assistance from the library to establish a Timeline for 6 Billion People day. The Library produced a chart which was displayed in the public viewing area of the Parliament. So successful was the display chart that there was unprecedented demand for copies, and consequential publicity for the Parliamentary Library.

Recently, at a morning tea to mark the passing of one of the earlier and visionary Parliamentary Librarians, Allan Fleming, it was instructive to note that in his plans to create the Legislative Research Service parliamentarians needed, he said that such a service would amount to 'democracy in action'.

He was and is right!

As this paper has described, the flood of information, the demands of rapid decision making, and representing the constituents views in new and complex areas, mean that our Parliamentary Library is more important than ever before in assisting parliamentarians in this tough call of maintaining democracy in action.

The very thought of the huge challenges that lie before parliamentarians in the 21st Century demands that, in any logical and democratic world, there must be a case for the maintenance and continuation of the very specific, very applied, very parliamentary, information, analysis and advice that we now take for granted in the Australian Parliament.

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[1] The ALP's 1994 affirmative action plan said women must fill 35% of seats needed to form government by the year 2002 and not less than 35% will be filled by men in 2002.

[2] The Committee system in the Australian Parliament expanded significantly in 1970 when the Senate established seven Legislative and General Purpose Standing Committees and five Estimates Committees. In 1987, the House of Representatives introduced its own comprehensive system of General Purpose Standing Committees. In 2001, there are more than forty committees, comprising Senators, Members of the House of Representatives, or both from a parliament with a combined membership of 224.

[3] Approximately 25% of the work of the Australian Parliamentary Information and Research Service is publicly available in the form of the briefs written on issues judged to be of interest to all Senators and Members and this is to be found at its website on www.aph.gov.au

[4] Guidelines suggest that the Government must respond to Committee Reports within three months of tabling though this is more honoured in the breach. This Report was tabled on 7 December 2000 and awaits a response.